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Chapter 2: Bad Axe - La Crosse River Basin Land Resources

The Bad Axe – La Crosse River basin covers nearly 1,000 square miles within the driftless, or unglaciated, portion of the state. Typical terrain consists of ridges with steep slopes and narrow stream valleys, characteristic of the coulee region. An elevation difference of 700 feet from valley floor to ridgetop is not uncommon. Soils are silt loam (loess) and sandy loam over sandstone and dolomite. Aside from agricultural crops, vegetation in the basin consists of oak forest, degraded oak savanna, grassland, dry prairie, and bottomland hardwoods. Exposed sandstone and dolomite cliffs are common throughout the basin. The major land use is agriculture, including dairy and beef farms, located on ridge tops as well as stream valleys. Highly erodable lands, common in the driftless area, are either in hardwoods or in set-aside programs such as the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). Wooded slopes are often managed for oak/hardwood production, however due to high tax assessments of non-agricultural land, more wooded slopes are now being grazed.

Forests

Of Wisconsin's 35 million acres of land, about 16 million acres, or 46%, is forested. The forested lands are important in many ways. Forests protect and enhance air and water quality, provide recreational opportunities, wildlife habitat, biodiversity, wood products and a variety of other values that improve our quality of life. "Trees are important to Wisconsin landscapes from the standpoint of beauty as single specimens or in groups. In forest and farm woodlands, they are vital tools for the stabilization of soil and in slowing water runoff. Forests are our largest public hunting and fishing grounds and produce wildlife and recreational benefits as well as timber crops." stated Fred Wilson in 1928, who was one of the first eleven forest rangers hired by the State of Wisconsin in 1911.



Figure 8. Cottonwood tree in the La Crosse River Marsh.

The United States Department of Agriculture's Forest Service inventories the forests of each state periodically. These inventories, conducted in Wisconsin in 1936, 1956, 1968, 1983, and 1996, assess the condition of all forests in the state and provide important information regarding their extent, composition, distribution, growth, mortality and utilization. Since 1968, the forest area in Wisconsin has been steadily increasing. This increase is mainly due to the conversion of marginal agricultural land back to forest. The 1996 survey of the La Crosse-Bad Axe basin's forests indicated that forests made up approximately 44% of the total land acres in the basin, an increase of 25,000 acres from the 1983 survey.

The most common forest type in the basin is oak-hickory (56%), followed by elm-ash-cottonwood (16%), maple-ash-basswood (16%), aspen-birch (8%), and pine (4%). The tree species with the greatest volume in the La Crosse-Bad Axe basin is red oak, followed by white oak, aspen, black or pin oak and soft maple. A wide variety of wildlife species associated with oak forests is present throughout the basin. Some representative examples include Cooper's hawk, wild turkey, ovenbird, blue jay, brown snake, gray treefrog, raccoon, gray squirrel, white footed mouse, and gray fox.

Along with the increase in total forested area, there has been an increase in number of trees. The number of live trees over ten feet tall in the La Crosse-Bad Axe basin increased by nearly 50 million between 1983 and 1996, to 163 million. However, the annual volume of trees removed exceeds the net annual volume of tree growth due to heavy harvest of the mature red oak resource. This removal of red oak has prompted the natural conversion to a maple-basswood forest, which is better able to regenerate within its own shady canopy. Such forest conversion will have negative long-term impacts for oak forest dependent wildlife.

An increasingly important factor for Wisconsin forests is the values and goals of private forest owners. Even as the average parcel size is shrinking, private individuals own the majority of Wisconsin's forests. In the La Crosse-Bad Axe basin, private individuals own 83% of the forests, while either local, county, state or federal entities own 17%. Most government owned lands have carefully written plans for timber management, harvest, insect and disease control, wildlife enhancement, aesthetics, or recreational opportunities. Few rules and regulations apply to privately owned forests, however tax incentives and professional forestry assistance are available to private land owners of forests who meet the minimum qualifications of the Managed Forest Law. Information about this program is available from Wisconsin DNR foresters located in each county of the state.

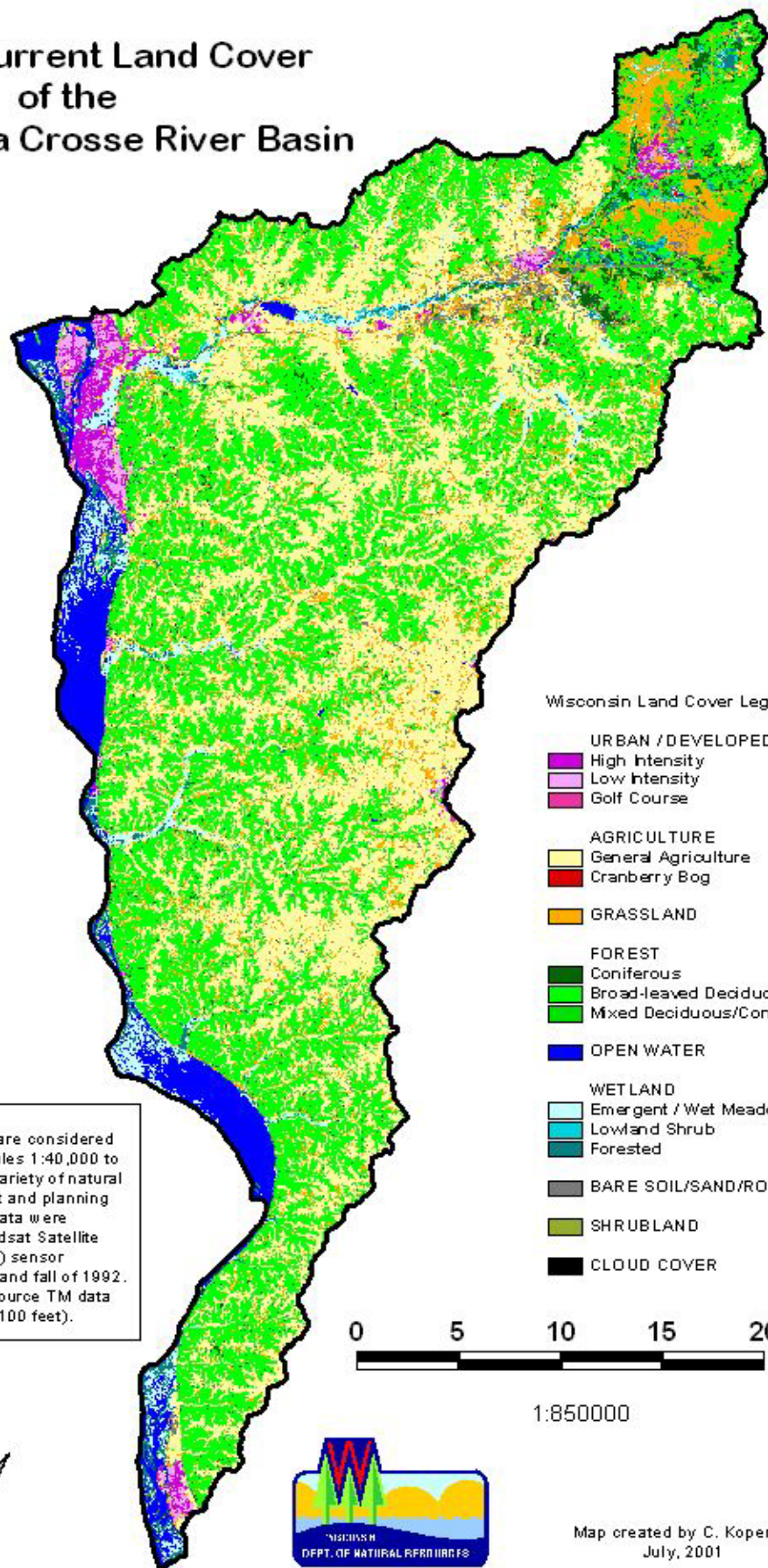
Grasslands

Grasslands, also known as prairies, are defined as plant communities which contain a dominance of grass and sedge species with a lack of trees and tall shrubs. Over 400 native plant species are characteristic of Wisconsin grasslands. Many of these plant species produce an array of colorful flowers throughout the growing season. Due to the diversity of plant species, a variety of songbirds, insects, reptiles, and mammals inhabit grasslands. The advent of agriculture in Wisconsin coupled with the lack of fire reduced the 3.1 million acres of grassland in the state to approximately 13,000 acres. Active management such as controlled burns, selective herbicide application, and mowing is necessary to re-establish and maintain grassland.

Before European settlement of the area, grasslands existed on both steep hillsides and valley floors. Native Americans managed grasslands by regularly setting fires. These grasslands attracted grazers such as elk, deer and bison, which were important to the Native American tribes for a variety of reasons. Grasslands in the Bad Axe – La Crosse basin are now only found where active management minimizes invasion of trees and tall shrubs.

The south facing bluffs of the Rush Creek and Battle Bluff State Natural Areas are managed by DNR staff by controlled burns and physical removal of trees. Fort McCoy contains approximately 4,000 acres of oak savanna, a type of grassland community, which is maintained by fires resulting from military training and some controlled burns.

Map 2. Current Land Cover of the Bad Axe - La Crosse River Basin



Wisconsin Land Cover Legend

- URBAN / DEVELOPED
 - High Intensity
 - Low Intensity
 - Golf Course
- AGRICULTURE
 - General Agriculture
 - Cranberry Bog
- GRASSLAND
- FOREST
 - Coniferous
 - Broad-leaved Deciduous
 - Mixed Deciduous/Coniferous
- OPEN WATER
- WETLAND
 - Emergent / Wet Meadow
 - Lowland Shrub
 - Forested
- BARE SOIL/SAND/ROCK
- SHRUBLAND
- CLOUD COVER

The Land Cover data are considered reliable at nominal scales 1:40,000 to 1:500,000 for a wide variety of natural resource management and planning applications. Source data were acquired from the Landsat Satellite Thematic Mapper (TM) sensor primarily in the spring and fall of 1992. The pixel size of the source TM data is 30 meters (approx. 100 feet).

0 5 10 15 20 Miles

1:850000



Map created by C. Koperski
July, 2001

Map 3. Bad Axe - La Crosse River Basin

Pre-European Settlement Vegetation
(mid-1800's)



Current Land Cover
(1971-1982)



0 10 20 30 40 Miles



1:850000



Map Created by C. Koperski
September 2001

Figure 9. Rush Creek State Natural Area bluffs managed as prairie on STH 35.



Grassland wildlife habitat and species will continue to decline due to agricultural use and urban development of existing grassland. The U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) offers a Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and other similar programs which provide financial incentive for farmers to set aside highly erodible land to plant grassland species. Management of this grassland acreage may be between 10 and 15 years. These set aside programs may temporarily offset some of the grassland loss.

Wetlands

Once considered wastelands and breeding grounds for mosquitos, wetlands are now recognized as providing critical habitat for wildlife, water storage, groundwater recharge, and recreational opportunities for wildlife watchers, hunters, and trappers. All wetlands have a common characteristic – soils that are periodically saturated with or covered by water. Only 53%, or 5.3 million acres, remain of the original 10 million wetland acres in the State of Wisconsin. While better understood and no longer destroyed as rapidly as a century ago, wetlands in Wisconsin continue to be lost and degraded in quality. Wetlands continue to be filled for road construction and other types of development, altered for cranberry production, and drained for agricultural use. Some are deteriorating as changing land use around them alters water flow and introduces sediment. The fragmentation of wetlands by legal or illegal filling often results in changes to the movement of water and animals which usually reduces the productivity of the once intact wetland. Federal, state and local regulations and land acquisition programs are making progress in slowing further wetland loss. However, laws will never prevent all losses nor will financial resources ever be enough to acquire all wetlands that need protection.

Excluding the Mississippi River associated wetlands, the Bad Axe – La Crosse basin contains approximately 11,400 acres of wetland, which is less than 2% of the entire basin. The steep topography of the basin is not favorable for wetlands; however, the hills quickly convey rain water and snow melt to the nearest stream channel where the steep gradient efficiently moves the water downstream. Near the lower end of large streams in the basin the gradient significantly decreases and the valley widens. These lower river valleys contain water that regularly saturates the adjacent soil, thus maintaining wetland characteristics. Large expanses of wetland in the basin are found along the lower portion of the La Crosse River, the Bad Axe River and Coon Creek. Smaller wetlands are commonly associated with many groundwater seeps and springs in the coulee region. These smaller wetlands are very important since they help maintain the water quality and quantity of nearby streams.

Programs in three levels of government-local, state, and federal-regulate activities in and near wetlands. The complexity of several layers of regulations requires landowners to contact their local zoning office, the Wisconsin DNR, and the U. S. Corps of Engineers to acquire the necessary information and applications for wetland activities. *Building Near Wetlands: The Dry Facts* (PUBL-WZ-WZ021 91) is a DNR publication that explains much of the process involved with building in or near wetlands.

Opportunities exist to protect and restore wetlands in the basin. The U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service offers the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP). This voluntary program allows landowners to receive financial incentives to enhance wetlands in exchange for retiring marginal agricultural land. The sale or donation of conservation easements to county, state, or federal agencies or non-profit conservancy groups also protects wetlands in the Bad Axe - La Crosse basin. The Mississippi Valley Conservancy, County Land and Water Conservation Departments, Wisconsin DNR, and the Natural Resources Conservation Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Ducks Unlimited offer opportunities and expertise in protecting wetlands.

La Crosse River Marsh

The La Crosse River flows through nearly 4,000 acres of adjacent wetland between Lake Neshonoc and the Mississippi River. Tamarack swamp, floodplain forest, seasonal and permanent wet areas with wetland plants are all common within this extensive wetland complex. Situated in the Mississippi flyway, these wetlands are heavily used by waterfowl for breeding and as a migratory stopover site. These wetlands also provide habitat for numerous species of rare, wetland-dependent birds, reptiles and plants. The portion of the La Crosse River that flows through the marsh contains 64 species of fish, which is 40% of the fish species that occur throughout Wisconsin. Included among them are three state threatened species: speckled chub, blue sucker, and river herring, and two species of special concern: western sand darter and American eel. During extended periods of high water, northern pike utilize the marsh as a nursery for their young. Four frog species and one toad species were documented during spring calling surveys in 1998.

The portion of the La Crosse River marsh west of HWY 16 is bisected by roads, railroads, and transmission lines. Myrick Park, located on the south side of the marsh in the City of La Crosse, contains an elevated trail that traverses the southern portion of the marsh. This trail serves an educational purpose using interpretive plaques to educate the community about the biological importance of the marsh.

Plans to fill and develop the marsh within the City of La Crosse began in the 1930s and continues to this day. The wetland remaining within the City of La Crosse is approximately half the size it was in 1938. Recognizing the value of this extensive wetland complex and understanding the development pressures, the WDNR approved the creation of the La Crosse Marsh Natural Resource Area to protect the remaining 1,400 acres west of HWY 16 through public ownership and easements.

Figure 10. La Crosse River Marsh

The La Crosse River marsh located east of HWY 16 includes approximately 2,500 acres of public and private land between La Crosse and West Salem. The Mississippi Valley Conservancy, a private, locally based, non-profit land trust, is working with local landowners, the Wisconsin DNR, and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to protect and enhance this portion of the La Crosse River marsh. The Mississippi Valley Conservancy uses conservation easements, land donations, cooperative acquisitions and a landowner registry program to conserve lands for ecological, scenic, and open space values. Approximately 350 acres of marsh is permanently preserved as wetland within what is called the La Crosse River Conservancy Area, east of HWY 16. [www.centurytel.net/mvc]



Storm sewers that drain portions of La Crosse and Onalaska contain numerous discharge points to the La Crosse River and associated marsh. Communities within the La Crosse urbanizing area will each receive a Wisconsin DNR stormwater discharge permit in 2002. The purpose of the permit is to improve the water quality of stormwater reaching the state's wetlands, rivers, streams, and groundwater.

Agricultural Lands

Agricultural lands of the Bad Axe - La Crosse basin total approximately 275,000 acres, which is 36% of the entire basin. Due to the steep topography of the basin, agricultural land in the basin is confined to the valley floors and wide ridgetops. Slopes too steep to crop or pasture sustain a forest canopy. Soil loss from farm land was a devastating problem until soil conservation measures were implemented in the 1930's and 40's. Cropping along the contours of the sloped lands was one measure that greatly reduced the loss of valuable soil. The characteristic strips of different crops in gentle curves around hills and through valleys is a common site in the basin to this day. Soil conservation remains an important objective of farmers in the basin today.

The Coon Creek, Bad Axe River and Rush Creek watersheds are dominated by moderate to heavy silt loam soils, which are generally well drained. The La Crosse River basin contains soils that are well to excessively drained loamy sands and silt loams. These soil types lend themselves well to agricultural crops if erosion is minimized.

Figure 11. Birds eye view of contour strips in La Crosse County.



The average size farm in the four counties found in the Bad Axe - La Crosse basin was 214 acres in 1997, down from 221 acres in 1992. Between 1992 and 1997, the four counties lost 200 working farms, however the total acreage in agricultural production did not decrease significantly. Even with a 12.8% decrease in total number of beef and milking cows in the four counties, concentrations of livestock have increased on some farms. Acreage in hay and alfalfa dominates the agricultural landscape of the basin, followed by corn, soybeans, and oats. Small amounts of tobacco, vegetables, and potatoes are also grown in the basin.

Public Lands

Not everyone who enjoys the outdoors is able to own their own piece of land. The purchase of private land from willing sellers for public use is important not only for the citizens of the state, but also for the plants, wildlife, natural history, and future of the State of Wisconsin. Federal, state, county, and city governments all own land for use, enjoyment, and protection of its natural beauty, ecological and geological significance, fish and wildlife resources. Three state bike trails, five state natural areas and three state fishery areas are found within the Bad Axe-La Crosse River basin.

State Natural Areas (SNAs) are formally designated sites owned by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, which are devoted to scientific research, the teaching of conservation biology, and the preservation of genetic diversity of plants and animals native to Wisconsin. They are not intended for intensive recreational use. Five State Natural Areas have been established in the Bad Axe-La Crosse River basin.

State Fishery Areas are acquired by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources to protect important waterways in Wisconsin and provide access for fishing to all citizens. State Fishery Areas consist of land owned by the Wisconsin DNR or private land where the Wisconsin DNR has acquired easements along various streams. An easement is generally no larger than a 66 foot wide corridor along both sides of a stream where only fishing, hiking and nature observation is allowed. It is important to remember that on easements the land is owned by private individuals, not by the State. There are three State Fishery Areas in the Bad Axe-La Crosse River Basin: Coon Creek State Fishery Area, La Crosse River State Fishery Area, and the La Crosse Comprehensive Fishery Area. These fishery areas include state ownership and/or streambank easements on numerous streams.

National Public Lands border the western edge of the Bad Axe-La Crosse River Basin. The Upper Mississippi River Fish and Wildlife Refuge begins north of the Bad Axe - La Crosse River basin at the Chippewa River and extends south 261 miles to Rock Island, IL. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service owns and manages nearly 200,000 acres of wooded islands and backwaters of the Mississippi River. The refuge is administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to protect and preserve habitat needed for migratory birds, fish and other wildlife. Millions of migratory birds, including ducks, geese and swans, rest and feed on the refuge during spring and fall migrations, and hundreds of bald eagles winter along the river. The popularity of a variety of recreational activities on the river has made this a heavily used refuge. Voluntary closed areas are established in some portions of the refuge to protect nesting and migratory wildlife, but most areas are open to hunting, fishing and general recreation. [www.umesc.usgs.gov/umr_refuge.html]

Other Federally owned lands in the basin are within the Fort McCoy Military Reservation, just east of Sparta in Monroe County. This property encompasses approximately 60,000 acres. Access to portions of this military reservation are available for recreation, hunting and fishing by permission from Fort McCoy.

Public Lands in Crawford County within the Bad Axe - La Crosse River Basin

La Crosse Comprehensive Fishery Area: Names of properties in Crawford County include portions of Sugar Creek and Copper Creek. These DNR properties can be used for fishing, nature observation, and photography.

Prairie du Chien Savanna State Natural Area: 213 acres of high quality savanna, dry prairie, and oak woodlands. Several state endangered and threatened plants occur on the property. It is one of the few remaining undeveloped bluffs overlooking the Mississippi River in the Prairie du Chien area.

Rush Creek State Natural Area: This 1806-acre natural area in the Rush Creek Watershed (BL01) is owned by the Wisconsin DNR. It is located 1.2 miles northwest of Ferryville on Hwy 35 and Rush Creek Road. A trail to the bluff top begins at the parking lot on Rush Creek Road. The outstanding feature of this natural area is a series of dry prairies on the steep limestone capped bluffs paralleling the Mississippi River. The prairie remnants are part of the most extensive series of "goat prairies" left in Wisconsin that host a nearly complete range of dry prairie plant species. The part of this SNA without southwest exposures contain red and white oak-dominated woods. A significant amount of black walnut, hickory, basswood, silver maple, and aspen are also present with the oak. A lowland forest of silver maple, elm, cottonwood, river birch and willow grows along Rush Creek. Animals common to the area include several raptor species, numerous songbird species, timber rattlesnakes, ruffed grouse, turkey, deer, squirrel, raccoon, muskrat, and beaver.

Rush Creek Streambank Protection Area: This 345-acre area includes Rush Creek and Cooley Creek, both high quality trout streams, in Crawford and Vernon Counties. The goal of the Wisconsin DNR Streambank Protection Program is to protect in-stream habitat and water quality by acquiring riparian land or easements in need of restoration. Protection and improvement actions include in-stream habitat structures, access improvements, bank stabilization, and re-vegetation of raw banks.

Public Lands in La Crosse County within the Bad Axe - La Crosse River Basin

City of La Crosse Major Parks: Copeland Park, Grandad Bluff, Green Island Park, Houska Park, Pettibone Park, Red Cloud Park and Riverside Park are all major La Crosse city parks located within the Bad Axe - La Crosse River Basin. Many more smaller neighborhood parks are found throughout the City.

City of Onalaska Major Parks: Glen Fox Park, Onalaska Community Park and Rowe Park are Onalaska City parks located within the Bad Axe - La Crosse River Basin. Many more smaller neighborhood parks are found throughout the City.

Coulee Experimental State Forest: This 2,972-acre area in the Lower and Little La Crosse River Watersheds (BL04 & BL05) is owned by the Wisconsin DNR. A parking lot is located off CTH II, south of Bangor and another small parking lot exists at the end of Russlan Coulee Road off CTH M. This land was purchased to study watershed management and forestry practices in the coulee region. Currently the land is open for hunting, cross-country skiing, hiking and horseback riding. Camping and campfires are not permitted. Principle game species of this area include deer, ruffed grouse, squirrels, turkeys and rabbits. Timber rattlesnakes are also present. The habitat within the forest consists primarily of upland timber and open fields. Statewide hunting regulations apply.

Goose Island Park: This 710-acre park is leased by La Crosse County from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The park is approximately five miles south of La Crosse on HWY 35. The island is surrounded by federally owned land in the Upper Mississippi River Fish and Wildlife Refuge. Park visitors will find three boat ramps, camping (tent and electrical sites), showers, flush toilets, sheltered picnic areas, grills and picnic tables. Hiking trails and a six mile canoe trail are also maintained for visitors.

Great River State Trail: This 24-mile trail traverses both the La Crosse-Bad Axe River Basin and the Black-Buffalo-Trempealeau River Basin. There are 130 acres with 2 miles of trail in the La Crosse-Bad Axe Basin and 138 acres with 22 miles of trail in the Black-Buffalo-Trempealeau Basin. The limestone screening trail was formerly the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad bed. This trail travels through a mixture of prairie and wet bottomlands between Onalaska in La Crosse County and Marshland, in Buffalo County. A variety of wildlife can be seen throughout the year. The trail is used for walking, hiking, biking, cross-country skiing, snowmobiling, fishing and photography. The trailhead office with parking is located at Oak Street in Onalaska. Parking and access to the Great River State Trail are also located at Midway, Lytles Landing, Trempealeau, Marshland, Perrot State Park, and the Trempealeau National Wildlife Refuge. Currently the Great River Trail is not directly linked to the La Crosse River Trail by a dedicated trail, but rather by local roads and La Crosse City bike trails. A trail pass is required for bikers 16 years of age and older. [www.tourism.onalaska.wi.us/bike.html]



Figure12: Hixon Forest Nature Preserve and Center (Left). This 800-acre nature preserve is owned by the City of La Crosse, but maintained by the non-profit organization called Hixon Forest Nature Center. Access to this park is from HWY 16 in the City of La Crosse. Hixon Forest contains numerous hiking trails, a trail link to the La Crosse Marsh trails, and a nature center. School programs, outdoor learning opportunities and scheduled activities for adults and children such as learning to snowshoe, orienteering and night hikes are sponsored by volunteers at the nature center.

[www.geocities.com/Yosemite/Forest/8488/index.htm]

La Crosse Comprehensive Fishery Area: Names of properties in La Crosse County include portions of

Burns Creek, Larson Coulee Creek, Bostwick Creek, Dutch Creek, and Mormon Creek. These DNR properties can be used for fishing, nature observation, and photography.

La Crosse County: La Crosse County owns approximately 856 acres of land scattered among numerous parcels within the Bad Axe - La Crosse River Basin. Of the total County owned land in this basin, approximately 670 acres surround Lake Neshonoc.

La Crosse River State Trail and Natural Area: This 22 mile/359 acre trail makes its way from Sparta in Monroe County to Medary in La Crosse County on the abandoned Chicago and Northwestern Railroad bed. The trail goes through both the Lower La Crosse and Little La Crosse River Watersheds (BL04 & BL05). Prairie remnants, farmlands, trout streams, hardwood forests, and wetlands are found along the limestone screening trail. The La Crosse River Trail is a connecting link between the Elroy-Sparta Trail and the Great River Trail; however the three trails are not currently linked by a dedicated trail, but rather by local roads. The trail is used by hikers, bikers and snowmobilers. A trail pass is required for bikers 16 years of age and older. One trailhead with parking can be found in the Town of Medary on CTH B just east of HWY 16. The other trailhead with parking is located in Sparta on South Water Street.

[www.lacrosseriverstatetrail.org]

Myrick Park: This 13 acre park, owned by the City of La Crosse, is located on La Crosse Street near the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse athletic fields. The park includes a zoo with both indoor and outdoor exhibits, handicap accessible playground, fenced in dog park, restrooms, public shelters, Indian mounds, and a La Crosse River marsh trail system with wildlife viewing platforms. The La Crosse Marsh trail is linked to the adjacent Hixon Forest Nature Center trails.

Norskedalen: This nature and Norwegian heritage center encompasses over 400 acres with more than six miles of nature trails. It is located on CTH PI northeast of Coon Valley. Norskedalen is a non-profit corporation that thrives on members, donors, and volunteers for maintenance, festivals, programs, classes and other activities. Facilities include a Shelter House, which is available by reservation, a visitors center, and a homestead reconstructed from log buildings moved from many area farms. [www.norskedalen.org]

Swarthout Park: This 20-acre park is owned by La Crosse County. The park is located on the northwest end of Lake Neshonoc on the eastern edge of West Salem. The park is located along the lake shore just above the dam and along the south shore of the La Crosse River below the dam. The park entrance is on HWY 16. Visitors will find a picnic shelter, tables, grills, vault toilets, hand pump, grass volleyball court, playground apparatus, beach, and one boat ramp with a pier. Across HWY 16 and below the dam, there is a canoe launch area to the La Crosse River. Wildlife food plots and natural wetlands are near the canoe launch parking area.

Veterans Memorial Park: This 210-acre park is owned by La Crosse County on the western edge of West Salem. Access to the park is from HWY 16. The park is adjacent to the La Crosse River and contains one canoe launch. Access to the La Crosse River State Trail is gained through a trail extension that begins within the park. Visitors to the Veterans Memorial Park will find sheltered picnic areas, camping sites (tent and electrical), camp store, vault and flush toilets, ball diamonds, and volleyball courts. A small fishing pond is found near the park entrance.
[www.lacrosseriverstatetrail.org/vets.htm]

Public Lands in Monroe County within the Bad Axe - La Crosse River Basin

Elroy-Sparta State Trail: The first eight miles of this 32-mile trail is in the Little La Crosse Watershed (BL05) of the La Crosse-Bad Axe Basin. The rest of the trail travels through portions of the Central Wisconsin River Basin and the Lower Wisconsin River Basin. The Elroy-Sparta Trail is found along Hwy. 71 between Elroy, in Juneau County, and Sparta, in Monroe County, on the abandoned Chicago and Northwestern Railroad bed. This 'granddaddy of all trails' was the first official rails to trails conversion in the U.S. in 1965. The limestone screening trail passes through three rock-tunnels. The Kendall and Wilton tunnels are ¼ mile long and the Norwalk tunnel is ¾ mile long. The tunnels are closed November 1-May 1. Bikers, hikers, and snowmobilers use the trail. A trail pass is required for bikers 16 years of age and older.
[www.elroy-sparta-trail.org]

Espe Fishing Pond: This 84-acre area located in the Little La Crosse River Watershed (BL05) is owned by the Wisconsin DNR. A one acre fishing pond with handicap access and parking area is located on the property. The Little La Crosse River, a Class II trout stream, flows through the property. However, an extensive wetland makes reaching the river difficult from the Espe Fishing Pond parking lot. Espe Pond is accessible from HWY 27 between Leon and Melvina. The area is subject to statewide hunting and fishing regulations.

Eureka Maple Woods State Natural Area: This 36 acre state natural area located in the Coon Creek Watershed (BL03) is owned by the Wisconsin DNR. It is located on steep slopes adjacent to the Coon Creek Fisheries Area along Rullands Coulee Creek on Oakdale Ave. Diverse plant and bird species inhabit the steep slopes dominated by sugar maple and basswood.

Farmers Valley Creek Fishery Area: This 138-acre fishery area south of Sparta in the Little La Crosse River Watershed (BL05) is owned by the Wisconsin DNR. This fishery area is accessible from Jefferson Road and CTH AA. Farmers Valley Creek, a Class I trout stream, flows through the property. The area is subject to statewide hunting and fishing regulations.

La Crosse Comprehensive Fishery Area: Names of properties in Monroe County include portions of Farmer's Valley Creek and Little La Crosse River. These DNR properties can be used for fishing, nature observation, and photography.

La Crosse River Fishery Area: This 463-acre fishery area in the Upper La Crosse River Watershed (BL06) is owned by the Wisconsin DNR. It is located two miles northeast of Angelo, adjacent to the Fort McCoy Military Reservation. It is open to fishing and hunting. Statewide hunting and fishing regulations apply. Principle game species of this area include waterfowl, turkeys, squirrels, ruffed grouse, deer, and rabbits. The La Crosse River, a Class II trout stream, flows through the fishery area.

Monroe County: Monroe County owns approximately 300 acres of land scattered among numerous parcels within the Bad Axe - La Crosse River Basin.

Pinnacle Rock Fishing Pond: This 55-acre area located in Little La Crosse River Watershed (BL05) is owned by the Wisconsin DNR. A 2-acre trout pond is found on the property, which is open to public fishing. The pond is on a tributary to the Little La Crosse River. It is located southeast of Melvina in the Township of Jefferson at the end of Marshall Road. Statewide hunting and fishing regulations apply.

Public Lands in Vernon County within the Bad Axe - La Crosse River Basin

Battle Hollow & Battle Bluff State Natural Area: This 241-acre natural area in the Rush Creek Watershed (BL01) is owned by the Wisconsin DNR. It is located 2.5 miles north of DeSoto at Hwy 35 and Battle Hollow Road. Battle Bluff, on the north side of the intersection of Hwy 35 and Battle Hollow Road, is an excellent example of a southern exposure goat prairie. Battle Hollow is found on the south side of Battle Hollow Road. The area contains dry prairie, southern dry forest, and oak savanna communities. The vegetation is diverse since there is both limestone and sandstone present. The entire area was the site of one of the Black Hawk War battles.

Coon Creek Cliffs State Natural Area: This 30-acre natural area in the Coon Creek Watershed (BL03) is owned by Wisconsin DNR. This area is located northeast of Coon Valley at the intersection of CTH P and Spring Coulee Ridge Road. This natural area contains a young population of paper birch and cliffs bordering Coon Creek.

Figure 13 Coon Creek Fishery Area: (Right)

This 605 acre fishery area located in the Coon Creek Watershed (BL03) is a combination of Wisconsin DNR owned land and streambank easements on private land. This fishery area encompasses Coon Creek from Chaseburg upstream and includes nearly all tributaries (Spring Coulee, Timber Coulee, Rullands Coulee, Berge Coulee, Poplar, Bohemian Valley, and numerous unnamed streams in La Crosse, Monroe and Vernon Counties).



The DNR owned land is open to fishing and hunting, but the easements only allow fishing, hiking, and nature observation. Statewide hunting and special trout fishing regulations apply. Principle game species include ruffed grouse, deer, squirrel and wild turkey. Handicap accessible trout fishing is available on Coon Creek at the Coon Valley Park off STH 14/61.

Duck Egg County Park: This 706-acre Vernon County park is located 10 miles west of Viroqua on Irish Ridge Road, off CTH Y in the Bad Axe River Watershed (BL02). The Springville Branch of the Bad Axe River flows through this park. Duck Egg offers fishing, hunting, hiking, and equestrian trails. A large, dry flood control dam is also found on the property.

Rentz Memorial Park (Esofea County Park): This 56-acre Vernon County park is located 9 miles northwest of Viroqua, just off CTH B in the Bad Axe River Watershed (BL02). The North Fork Bad Axe River flows through the park and a trout pond is located on the property. Rentz Memorial Park offers fishing, camping, hiking, picnic areas and a soccer field.

Sidie Hollow County Park: This 489-acre Vernon County park is located 3 miles west of Viroqua on CTH XX in the Bad Axe River Watershed (BL02). The park offers camping, hiking, picnicking, hunting, and fishing. The 40-acre lake in the park is an impoundment created by a dam built across the South Fork of the Bad Axe River as a PL566 flood control project.

Vernon County: Vernon County owns approximately 762 acres of land within the Bad Axe - La Crosse River Basin. Duck Egg County Park contains the majority of this acreage and Rentz Memorial Park contains the balance.

References – Chapter 2

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